

MISCELLANY

HALLOWE'EN.

SOPHY LANGHAM'S DIARY.

MALDON HALL, October 27, 1846.—We have been a week here to-day, and I have never once opened my diary. There is a blank in my book from that day we left our dear mother and our quiet house, till this day, October 27. But as I have made a firm resolution to keep a faithful chronicle of this year, (which is now fast waxing to its close,) I must write retrospectively, recording the events which have filled the week omitted, as well as I can, from memory.

Our parting from mamma was a sad one. We had never left her before, and both Margery and I feared she would be very lonely without us. We did not, on that account, wish to accept Miss Langham's invitation, but our mother thought it best that we should; she has always regretted that we knew so little of my father's family, which was an ancient and wealthy one. It was their fault that we did not.

Because my father (the son of a younger son) was not rich, only possessing the pay of an officer of the army; and because he had married a country clergyman's daughter, with only a moderate dowry, they scarcely took any notice of him, an occasional invitation for the shooting season even gradually growing less frequent, till it ceased.

Sir Jonathan Langham, his uncle, lived in great style at Maldon Hall, but after his death the maiden heiresses withdrew altogether from the world, and saw no one, not even intimate friends. We had forgotten their existence, when Miss Langham's letter of invitation to ourselves recalled them to our memories. It was really a very touching epistle, though simply and coldly worded.

In her advanced age, she had lost her sister, and shortly after Miss Augusta's death, a singular mortality had deprived her of the two nephews who were next in succession to the property. "She was alone," she said, "in the world, and a yearning had come over her to see and make acquaintance with poor Frank Langham's children. Would my mother spare us to her for a few weeks?"

"Allow me, however," continued the writer, "to explain that it is not with any view as to the disposal of my fortune that I send this invitation. Unhappily (as I cannot forbear thinking) my father's will disposes of it, after the death of his daughters, to the next male heir, and this heir now appears to be a young Irishman, very distantly related; though, by a pure descent, he is one of the family. He is to visit me shortly."

My mother was decided in her resolution to let us go by this part of the letter. Miss Langham could not ascribe our visit to any mercenary motive. We could not incur by it a degrading suspicion—so we came to Maldon.

It was a cold autumn twilight when we entered the park, and a feeling of strange awe, a kind of misgiving of approaching evil, stole over me as I watched the old trees bowing their heads solemnly towards us, as if in token of a gloomy welcome. I shivered. Margery looked round at me and said, laughing, "Somebody is walking over your grave."

"A more poetical Arab reading of such creeping of the flesh is, that something evil is near us," I replied.

"Thanks, Sophy. I am the only person near you," she said, merrily. "There! you shivered again. Are you cold?"

"Not!" said I, "but very melancholy. Is there not something sudden in this old place, whose ancient trees have sheltered so many of our race, long since gone?"

"Not to me," said bright Margery. "I can but think what a splendid inheritance it is, and how I wish Miss Langham would leave it to me. Listen—there is a chime of church bells. Is it in honor of our appearance at the ancestral hall, do you think?"

"No," said I, "the ringers are only practicing."

"You are a strange mixture of the common-place and sentimental, Sophy," said Margery. "Do the bells say nothing to you?"

"Only, 'Sophy and Margery go home again,' to my ear, not being such an agreeable hearing as Whittington's was," said I.

Then Margery began an eager discussion about bells and their varied voices, and how people always fancy they hear in them whatever they wish; which subject continued till we drove up to the hall door of Maldon.

It is a noble old pile; and as we stepped in the ancient hall and glanced at the pillars and arches, the old armor and trophies of the chase, I could not help liking to feel that it had been the home of my ancestors.

A butler, whose age and appearance were in good keeping with the dwelling, ushered us into the grand library, lighted by a large glowing fire, near which sat an old lady, who rose as we entered, and leaning on an ivory stick, advanced to greet us.

A very stately person is Miss Langham, of Maldon, and her manner is wonderfully courteous and gracious. I can use no other words. She led us to seats near the fire, and began a conversation by inquiring after the health of our mother and assuring us that she felt grateful to mamma for permitting us to visit her.

"I knew your father very intimately in my youth," she said. "We were cousins, you know, but time and the changes of the world divided us. He was some years younger than myself, but he is gone first."

She signed deeply, and gazed for a moment into the blazing fire, which cast a long flickering shadow of herself against the wall. Then turning her gaze full upon us, she added, addressing me, "You most resemble your father."

"So mamma says," I replied; "Margery is exactly like our mother."

Miss Langham looked earnestly at my sister, and Margery blushed beneath the fixed gaze of the old lady.

How beautiful my sister looked in the warm fire-light. There are few girls as lovely as Margery, and so Miss Langham must have thought, though she could not, of course, express her admiration.

"I have two other guests beside yourselves," she added, after a pause. "The heir of Maldon, Mr. Cornelius O'Halloran, and a Langham—though of a remote branch. They are out shooting, but will be introduced to you at dinner. Perhaps now you would like to go to your rooms, and take off your bonnets."

We assented, and were conducted by Miss Langham herself to two charming bed-rooms, opening en suite, with a small boudoir.

"These three rooms are at your disposal," she said. "Shall I send my maid to you?"

I declined, with thanks, adding that we had no lady's maid ourselves, and could dress without assistance; "or, at least," I added, "we help each other."

The old lady nodded approvingly, and walked away.

We unpacked and prepared for dinner; but ever and anon between this occupation, I walked to the window and looked out upon the park and the soft gray landscape beneath.

A new charm was added to the latter in the new tower of a fine old church, which rose above the trees; yet the feeling of depression which had stolen over me on our entrance into the park deepened as I looked out on the heritage of my family, and I thought that after all it was pleasanter to live in our mother's cheerful cottage, and gaze upon our own bright flower-beds and green lawn, with its one old oak, than on the gloomy and suggestive grandeur of an ancient and extensive park.

I was glad when Margery called me to assist her in dressing, for her light clasp and anxiety as to how our dresses would look, drew my thoughts to cheerful commonplaces.

Very lovely Margery looked that evening. I felt quite proud of the admiration I could perceive she excited.

Just before dinner, the two gentlemen guests were introduced to us by Miss Langham. Her companion, a pleasant, chatty person, and the rector, a rather pompous old gentleman, who could appreciate the powers of the Maldon cook so well that he talked very little, were of our party. The rector's silence was atoned for, however, by the ceaseless chatter—I can call it nothing else—of Mr. O'Halloran. He is the most astonishing individual I ever met. Tall, handsome and admirably dressed, he is nevertheless vulgar. Yes, the heir of Maldon would never be taken for a gentleman, if one did not know his birth. He has a most unpleasant brogue, and uses expressions which are quaint, but which gives one the idea of being the sayings of the American peasantry. However he is evidently studying to acquire a good manner, and I could not help observing that he both watched and imitated Anthony Langham, who is as distinguished-looking as a Langham should be.

I have learned since from Mrs. Moore—Miss Langham's companion—that the old lady is sensible of the want of refinement in her kinsman, and regrets the relationship. If he had not made his appearance in the most unexpected way from America, Maldon would have descended to Mr. Anthony Langham, as next male heir, and Miss Langham mourns over the entail which was to take effect after the death of herself and her sister. Still, she was too high-bred to let Mr. O'Halloran see that he displeases or disgusts her, and I fancy he even thinks himself a favorite.

Mr. O'Halloran is much struck with Margery's beauty, and offers her the wildest homage, paying her compliments so personal as to be quite unpleasant. My sister blushes and looks indignant, but he is stolid, and cannot perceive that he has offended.

We do not see a great deal of him—that is a comfort—as he is shooting all day about the preserves, or rather, I fancy, talking to the game-keepers, as Anthony says he is not a good shot.

Margery and I spend our mornings in our little boudoir, for Miss Langham sees no one till luncheon; then we write our letters and do any little work we may require. Girls who have no maids and small wardrobes must use some skill and industry to appear like ladies; and Margery has great taste and ingenuity, and can alter ribbons and re-arrange trimmings, till she makes one dress do the duty of two or three.

But these toilet details are quite beneath the dignity of a diary, so let me pass on to something else.

It is astonishing how fast monotonous days melt into each other and leave no trace on the memory. I cannot now recall and put in their right places the little incidents, the sayings, doings, thoughts and feelings of

the past week. So, adieu, neglected time! All the impression thou has left is just that I love Miss Langham, like her companion, detest the heir, and pity that charming young Langham, who should have been the master of the old place. He is all that the lord of such a heritage ought to be—manly, courteous, gentle, kind and intelligent.

Margery does not share my horror of O'Halloran. She began by laughing at him; she now laughs with him, and actually declares that his eyes are very fine, and that he is handsomer than Anthony Langham!

If it were any other girl but Margery, I should say she saw him through a golden glamour.

OCTOBER 28.—We are to have a large party here on Hallowe'en, the 31st. Miss Langham likes keeping up old customs, and we are to have all the weird rites of the charmed evening carried out.

She has presented Margery and me with new dresses for the occasion—very pretty ones they are.

My beautiful sister has evidently won the hearts of both our kinsmen. Anthony Langham loves her, I can see, though he is kept from her by the constant watchfulness of Mr. O'Halloran; so, to console himself, he takes refuge with me and admires her to me, and listens to my sisterly praises with pleased smiles.

Happy Margery! If she marries him, she will be truly fortunate. I told her so this evening, as we were dressing for dinner, but she only laughed and said:

"What should we live on, Sophy? He has only his wits for dowry."

A nobler inheritance, in my mind, than Maldon itself.

Ah! how the wind howls and moans through the trees. The night is full of noises. Surely I heard a bolt opened down stairs. If it should be robbers!

I have listened, for some time, with a beating heart, but there has been no repetition of the grating sound; it must have been my fancy or the wind.

I will close my book, say my prayers and go to bed; it is silly to write so late, with my fire just out and my room gloomy from the feeble light of my candles. It makes me nervous and fanciful; so good night, my diary.

NOVEMBER 1.—I resume my diary to-night, because I dare not enter in it, by day, the events of the past twenty-four hours. Margery might glance accidentally over my shoulder, or wonder what moved me so much, and ask questions impossible to answer.

My hand shakes visibly as I write. Alas! I half regretted that my diary was so barren of incident; that the days were so monotonous and unmarked by any landmarks of memory. I have incident enough now to record, to my sorrow.

Hallowe'en came. A large party assembled in the stately saloon, opened for the first time in forty years. We had a grand dinner in the banquet-room, at which Miss Langham did not preside, the rector taking her place; and, after dinner, we joined her in the drawing-room, and began, under her direction, the magic rites of the evening.

We burned nuts together (having named them first) and read a laughing angury from their explosion or quiet combustion. We felt (blindfold) for cups holding earth, water, emptiness, and one a pocket-pistol, these symbols being prophetic of our future husbands' professions; and Mr. O'Halloran loudly exclaimed against the truth of the oracles, when Margery put her little hands into the empty basin, which foreboded single life.

The fun of the evening moved even Miss Langham to merry smiles. It must have seemed as if a glimpse of her youth had revisited her. During a pause she said:

"There are some Hallowe'en rites, more trying to the nerves than these, sowing hemp-seed, for example."

"What is that?" we asked, simultaneously.

"The lady who questions fate," she replied, "takes some hemp-seed; goes, at midnight, to the churchyard, and sows it around the belfry-tower from whence peal the marriage-bells, and says:

Hemp-seeds, I sow you;  
Hemp-seeds, I sow you;  
And he that shall marry me,  
Come after me and harrow ye."

We laughed, and O'Halloran (who had appeared to better advantage under these livelier auspices) declared that he wished some of the ladies would try it.

A universal exclamation of dislike to the experiment was answering him, when a footman entered, and, approaching Mr. O'Halloran, told him that a person wished to speak to him on imperative business.

I fancied that O'Halloran changed countenance a little, but he laughed still, and hoping that somebody would prove heroic and try the hemp-seed sowing, he left the room.

The conversation continued on the same subject; Miss Langham, with quiet humor, regretting that the courage of the young ladies of the nineteenth century was so much inferior to that of the damsels of ancient times, till, in playful daring, I offered to sow hemp-seed myself. For a moment, she hesitated, then she replied:

"So you shall, Sophy! Only, I stipulate that you shall wrap yourself in a large shawl, and sow your hemp-seed running, to keep you warm. The church is so close at hand, and so private, (shut into the grounds,) that there is no real cause for fear."

"Surely you won't go, Miss Sophy?"

was the general cry, and Mrs. Moore, approaching me, remonstrated in a low tone, saying that Miss Langham was a little childish on these points, and I had really better not go; but a sudden resolution possessed me to undertake the adventure, and I persisted in it.

About ten minutes or a quarter to twelve, I left the hall, alone, wrapped in a heavy woolen shawl, which I drew over my head. I was followed by the good wishes and remonstrances of most of the guests, who escorted me to the door.

It was a bright moonlight night, and my shadow was cast on the gravel carriage-road almost as distinctly as in the sunshine. The wind sighed mournfully through the trees, that waved their large arms above my head; and I confess, when I turned down the steps leading to the churchyard, a thrill of awe—I would not allow it to be fear—passed through me.

Everything was so still and hushed, and the tall shadow of the steeple fell so clearly on the ground in the solemn light, that I felt uneasy at the idle desecration of observing such a pagan rite on the holy ground.

As I approached the church more closely, this feeling of reverential reluctance to perform my foolish task increased. Alas! if I had only obeyed it! But it was combated by the fear of ridicule, and of the doubts my companions might feel as to my real motive for not completing my task, as well as by a reluctance, to cast implied blame on so aged a lady as our kind hostess. So I took the basket in my hand, and scattered the hemp-seed, whispering the formula, as I ran round the tower.

Suddenly I heard the sound of footsteps. A superstitious fear, which was quite uncontrollable, seized me. I darted into an embrasure of the wall, and crouched breathless behind a large buttress.

The next moment, I heard voices as well as footsteps. They came very near, and paused close by my hiding-place.

"I tell you," said one voice, "it is of no use to make a fool of yourself. You must get the property at once, or you will be found out. Here's the needful dose, if you like to give it to her."

"I can't do it," replied the voice of O'Halloran. "I will wait and see what will come of it; if I am found out, why even then we shall have a good booty. We are sure of the plate, if we don't get the estates. But my belief is, we are all right, and shan't fail of success. Having taken in the lawyer hitherto, as well as the old woman, we have no real cause to fear at present; it's a long way to America, and it's nothing but your impatience to share the property that makes you urge such haste, Uncle Ned."

"Uncle Ned!" The voice of the speaker thus named was that of a tall, fine-looking footman, whom Miss Langham had engaged soon after her sister's death, when she resumed her long-interrupted intercourse with the world.

"Well, you have heard what John Green said. He wouldn't have come down to-night to warn us for nothing. Give her this dose," continued the voice of the footman, "and you will be master here by to-morrow."

"I have said I won't, and I won't," replied O'Halloran, doggedly. "You may do it yourself, if you like; but mind, I don't consent to it."

The footman laughed, and said: "A precious bull that! but I am too old a bird to be took with chaff. I ain't going to put my head in an 'alter for any one; but I advise you to take Jack's advice and warning. Now, I must go; it's nigh upon supper-time, and I shall be missed."

They moved on. The next minute, O'Halloran's foot crashed something, quite audibly in the stillness.

"Hillo!" said he, with an oath, "what's this? Hemp-seed all along the path!" Another oath. "Some of those confounded gals have been sowing it, then! Can we have been overheard?"

"Nobody was here a minute or two ago," replied Ned; "I looked behind every buttress before we began our talk."

"They may have come since. Follow the track of the seed," said O'Halloran.

And they did follow it, with fatal accuracy, and drew me, shivering with fear and horror, from my hiding-place.

"Miss Sophy!" cried Uncle Ned, in a tone of dismay. Then, with fearful oaths, which even now ring in my ears, he drew a large clasp-knife from his pocket. I saw the blade glitter in the moonlight. I shut my eyes, and thought a rapid prayer.

"Ned," said O'Halloran, in a whisper, "it won't do! Detection would be certain. Go home and wait, for fear you should be missed; I will take care of the gal."

Still swearing, Ned loosed his hold, but O'Halloran held my other arm firmly.

"Now, Miss Sophy," he said, as we were left alone, "you have learned your fate, no mistake. Die you must, and that this instant, unless you swear by all the saints in the calendar that you will never tell a word of what you've heard this blessed night to any human soul."

I hesitated; surely death would be preferable to even an involuntary participation in so terrible a fraud.

But this heroic decision did not last. I could not help pitying myself, just as if it had been somebody else. The young life seemed more precious to me than the old inheritance of our race.

I weighed (with the rapidity of excited thought) my mother's and Margery's tears against the wrong done to Anthony Langham. Besides, Uncle Ned evidently feared detection. It might come without my aid.

Moreover, I am ashamed to confess it, I was dreadfully afraid of being murdered. Fear confused all my perceptions.

[CONCLUDED IN OUR NEXT.]

State South Carolina--Richland Dist.

By Joseph Bell, Ordinary of said District. WHEREAS Elizabeth C. Stirling had applied to me for letters of administration on all and singular the goods and chattels, rights and credits of Gabriel R. Stirling, late of the District aforesaid, deceased.

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